

Jacob Needleman, philosopher

Our humility in the face of life's mystery

Jacob Needleman
Department of
Philosophy
San Francisco State
University
1600 Holloway Ave
San Francisco, CA
94132

jneedle@sfsu.edu

Competing interests:
None declared

West J Med
2001;175:182

We are familiar with great photographs that make powerful statements, that show us important truths about ourselves and the world we live in. But these photographs do not make a statement; they embody a question, an overwhelmingly poignant question about the physical life that we have all been given and which we pass on to our children. The essential question embodied in Camille Solyagua's photographs cannot easily be put into words. But if we are willing to let the images in, we will feel the question, and like all great questions, it will make us quiet and invite us to search for understanding.

At first, of course, we may be shocked and immediately adopt a clinical attitude. But soon we may notice a strange kind of beauty in these pictures, in these "monsters" that have been photographed so softly, so gently, and with such calm compassion. These are not pictures in a textbook. These are not merely "cases," not merely examples of genetic pathology. They are people who tried and failed to become people. One feels in them, and in our selves, sorrow, resignation, and despair—as well as grace and tenderness—all caught in postures that will never change.

And what is it they ask us to understand, especially now, in a time when our society seems to have within its grasp the power to manipulate the genetic structure of living beings, ourselves included? Perhaps pictures such as

these should be in all our laboratories—not so much to make us doubt ourselves, but to liberate our feeling of humility in front of the mystery of life.

Surely, the physicists who first began to understand atomic energy and its applications must have experienced this sense of humility along with the triumph of discovery. But now we can surely say—given our knowledge of the potential destructiveness of atomic energy—that there was something that neither the physicists nor we understood about ourselves and about the danger of knowledge. Now we can see that we may have been too distanced from the inner authority of genuine moral feeling.

These photographs can help us ask that question anew: the question not of what is right or wrong, the question not of what we should or should not do, but the essential question, the one we rarely ask: what in ourselves can *know* the good? What in ourselves can *know* what we should or should not do?

It is clear what we are speaking of. The word is *conscience*.

Look again at these photographs. Let them in.

Jacob Needleman is a professor of philosophy at San Francisco State University and the author of *The Way of the Physician* and the forthcoming *The American Soul*.

